



ALGERNON KNOX, ACCIDENTAL DETECTIVE

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

V--Miss De Hagon, Spy.

KNOX'S visit to Charing Cross on that particular evening was almost casual. He had found himself in the vicinity at about 9:45 and had remembered suddenly that Percival was expected on leave from Paris either that evening or the following morning. He reached the platform just as the train arrived, and, having satisfied himself that Percival was not among the passengers, was on the point of departing when his attention was attracted by a man who was obviously suffering from some sort of illness. The person in question was young, well dressed, evidently a foreigner. His face was ghastly pale, and although the night was cold there were drops of perspiration upon his forehead. His teeth were clenched as though he were making a fierce effort to retain consciousness. Knox stepped over to his side.

"I'm afraid you're rather ill," he said. "Take my arm, if you like, and I'll help you to a taxi."

The man looked at him swiftly. Knox's appearance, however, once more stood him in good stead. The man almost clutched at his arm.

"You are very good," he muttered. "Get me a taxi, if you can, and tell the driver to take me to the nearest hospital. And there is something else. Listen! There is something else."

"Wait till you are sitting down in the taxi," Knox suggested soothingly. "Sure you wouldn't like a drop of brandy first?"

The young man shuddered. "It was the brandy—they gave me in the smoking-room that did it. Listen! 17 Berkeley Square—you heard that—Miss de Hagon. You go there for me. You tell her what you have seen—where I am. You promise?"

"With pleasure!" Knox replied cheerfully. "Here's a taxi. I'll take you across the way to the Charing Cross Hospital."

He opened the door and almost lifted his companion into the vehicle. Then, before following himself, he turned sharply around. He was conscious that two men had been almost treading upon their heels down the platform. The face of one was familiar, although for a moment it puzzled Knox. He gave the driver the address and, stepping in, seated himself by the side of the young man, who seemed already half-unconscious.

"It is very kind of you," the latter murmured in French. "Tell them I have plenty of money. I can pay for a private room. And remember, Miss de Hagon, 17 Berkeley Square."

Knox took his charge to the hospital and waited for a report. The young man, he was told presently, seemed to be suffering from a sort of ptomaine poisoning.

Knox stepped back into the taxicab and drove to 17 Berkeley Square.

The door flew open almost as he touched the bell, and a butler in quiet livery received his inquiry.

"Miss de Hagon is not receiving tonight, sir," he announced doubtfully.

"I have a special message for her," Knox explained. "The matter is really urgent. I am unknown to Miss de Hagon, but my name is Knox."

The butler accepted his card, and, opening the door of a small sitting-room, ushered the visitor in. Knox stood by the fire, looking around him with some curiosity. Suddenly the door opened. Without announcement, a young woman had stepped in and was looking at him inquiringly. She was unusually slim and not very tall. She wore a gray dress of some very soft and very thin material, which fastened at the throat with a brooch which contained one pearl of enormous size. She had the bluest eyes he had ever seen. Her hair was unfashionably arranged in a manner strange to him. She wore a fringe upon her forehead and long earrings. His first impressions of her were that she was clever, eccentric, fascinating.

"You are Miss de Hagon?" Knox asked.

"I am," she answered. "I am told that you wish to speak to me urgently."

Knox rapidly explained his errand. Her expression became entirely inscrutable. Before he had finished, her finger was upon the bell.

"I am exceedingly obliged to you—Mr. Knox," she said. "I will go to my friend at once."

The butler was standing in the doorway. "Send Annette with my cloak," she ordered quickly, "and whistle for a taxicab. Good evening, Mr. Knox," she added, with a little nod of dismissal.

Knox bowed low and passed out into the street.

"An interesting little episode," he thought as he strolled toward Pall Mall. "But—I wish I could remember that man's face!"

George Hanover, a distant connection of his:

"Beg you join house party here tomorrow. Shooting woods. Motor down early, if possible. Two guns short. Rely on you. Hanover."

"Phone through on long distance to Corputy, Harwood," Knox directed his man. "Tell Sir George Hanover that Mr. Knox is delighted to accept."

Knox arose at 6 o'clock the next morning, and, after a three hours' journey, arrived at his destination just as his host was engaged in arranging the field for the first shoot. He advanced to greet his early visitor with much satisfaction.

"Now this is what I call really sporting of you, Algy! I only hope you'll get good sport."

Knox detained his host as he was in the act of hurrying off. "Can you tell me the name of my right-hand neighbor, Sir George?" he asked.

Sir George Hanover looked down the avenue to where, a dozen yards or so away, a tall, slim man was standing—dark, good looking in a way, but with a somewhat peculiar cast of countenance.

"The Marquis de Brinault," he replied. "He's Emmie's cousin, you know. A devilish good shot, they tell me."

Sir George bustled off, and Knox, after eating a sandwich and taking a drink from his flask, fell to stirring the pools of his memory. It was not until the drive was over, however, that he suddenly remembered.

They went off to their places. The drive was a long one, and Knox shot badly. All the time his brain was at work. He recognized De Brinault as a French spy. He was staying here in Sir George Hanover's house, staying here with a purpose. Why?

Knox was introduced at luncheon time to the other members of the house party at Corputy, some of whom he had not yet met, as he had only called at the house in passing. There were five men, including De Brinault, all of whom he knew, and only two women. One was his hostess, Lady Hanover, fat, fifty, and frivolous. The other was Miss de Hagon. Notwithstanding her altered attire, her trim, tailor-made gown, her smart little toque and heavy veil, he recognized her at once. She shook hands without the slightest sign of ever having seen him before. Knox sat down to lunch more puzzled than ever. He was on the outskirts of a mystery in which were linked together De Brinault, the sick man at Charing Cross, and Miss de Hagon.

They lunched in a great barn attached to an old-fashioned farmhouse. Knox found himself placed next Miss de Hagon and did his best to make himself agreeable. He found her personally even more attractive than he had imagined. Her pale, oval face, her wonderful blue eyes, her masses of brown hair, and her quaintly combed little fringe gave her a piquant originality which he found entirely charming. She spoke with a slightly foreign accent, save for which he would have judged her to be an American. She treated Knox with especial favor. De Brinault, on her other side, although he made frequent advances, was almost neglected.

"An affair of a challenge, without a doubt," the latter remarked, a little irritably, as the two men walked out together. "Do you know that you have monopolized Miss de Hagon disgracefully?"

"Think so?" Knox asked.

"My friend," De Brinault replied, "I have come to a decision. You are here on account of Miss de Hagon. So am I. Let us join forces. This time we are natural allies. We can help one another."

"It is perhaps excusable," Knox remarked drily, "if the suggestion reminds me somewhat unfortunately of certain circumstances connected with our last meeting."

"Rubbish!" De Brinault exclaimed. "To a man of common sense, all is clear. On our last meeting you stood for the secret service of England and I for the secret service of France. There was a little duel. The odds would certainly seem to have been in my favor. I had experience, and I held the stronger position. Nevertheless I lost. I admit that I lost. I made the one unpardonable mistake—I underrated my opponent. I am not likely to repeat it."

The whistle sounded, and they strolled apart to their places. It was not, indeed, until the late afternoon, on their way back to the house, that they came together again. The women had left them almost immediately after lunch, owing to a drizzling rain. De Brinault, who had been shooting magnificently and had seemed in the highest of spirits, was now depressed and silent.

Suddenly they heard the sound of a horn. A car passed by on its way to the house. Its single occupant was an

elderly man—stout, and with a short, iron-gray beard. A little exclamation broke from De Brinault's lips.

"Already?" he muttered.

"Who is that?" Knox asked.

"His excellency, Prince Melinoff," De Brinault answered bitterly.

"The Russian ambassador?"

De Brinault nodded. "The man with the greatest brain in Europe and one weakness—Adele de Hagon. He follows her as a moth does the candle, even here, at a country house in the middle of November, while the lights are flaring in Downing street by night

do not blame you," he said, "but remember this: We were on opposite sides last time we met. Tonight we are allies."

"Are we?"

"We are allies so far as this," De Brinault continued. "Under this roof—perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow—they are hatching treason, these two, treason against my country and yours, treason against the balance of power which alone keeps Europe at peace."

"By these two," Knox murmured, "you mean?"

"Adele de Hagon and the Russian."



She held out one hand imploringly toward him.

and day, and Pall Mall is alive with war rumors."

"Any truth in them, do you think?" Knox questioned.

"Ask Melinoff," De Brinault replied. "It is he who can make or avert war."

"Wish I understood more about politics," Knox sighed.

De Brinault looked at him long and searchingly through the gathering gloom. "My young friend of the ingenious countenance," he said, "come to my room when you have had your bath, or as soon as you have changed, and I will give you a little lesson."

At 7:15 Knox presented himself at De Brinault's room and was admitted by his valet, who instantly withdrew. De Brinault, already dressed, welcomed his guest with a little wave of the hand and poured the contents of a cocktail shaker into two wine glasses.

"Mr. Knox," he said, "I am glad to see you. Will you drink with me to our better acquaintance?"

Knox took the wine glass with a little bow. He gazed at the amber liquid meditatively.

"There is nothing, I presume," he began, with some hesitation.

De Brinault changed glasses with him and promptly drained the contents. "I

know, like every one else, that it is the question of Russia which makes the balance of power in Europe. If Germany and Austria, with Italy, could rely upon the neutrality of Russia, what have they to fear from France and England? Nothing! Now I will tell you a thing which is known to but four men in Europe, including the President of France and your own prime minister. An Austrian envoy left Vienna for London thirty-six hours ago on a secret mission. Not for St. Petersburg, mind you. We could deal with him there readily enough. Besides, his errand would be fruitless. Russia does nothing without Prince Melinoff's sanction. Melinoff is the brains of Russia. What he says is law. When the danger signals are hoisted, it isn't to St. Petersburg we look. It is around Melinoff wherever he may be. Austria wants Serbia. Germany desires the humiliation of Great Britain and to check the growing strength of France. Russia can help her to both—at a price."

"And the price?"

"Constantinople! Now, my young friend, you know more than the man in the street, more than the well-informed diplomatist. You are within the inner councils. If I thought that I had made a mistake, it would be the end of your career. But I have made no mistake."

"Go on," Knox begged impressively.

"The man whom you helped into a taxicab at Charing Cross was Count Etzfeld, the Austrian envoy of whom I have spoken. The doctors at the hospital called it, I believe, ptomaine poisoning. What does it matter? He lies between life and death, but sufficiently near life, worse luck, to have passed on his mission to Adele de Hagon."

"My fault, I am afraid," Knox sighed.

"Your fault, indeed, but your unwitting fault. Certainly, if you had not been there Etzfeld would never have reached

a violent dislike to me. That is where my scheme fails before it is begun. For its success, it was absolutely necessary that she should treat me before people with at any rate a little more than civility. She treats me instead with a great deal less. That, my friend Algernon Knox, is where you come in."

Knox sipped his cocktail thoughtfully. "Do!" he murmured.

"Adele, for some reason or other, regards you with favor. Perhaps she is suspicious of me. Who can tell? She regards you with favor, and, like all women, she loves to play with fire. That is to say, up to a mild point she loves to make Melinoff jealous. She will continue, therefore, if you are attentive, if you play the part I design for you, to show you favor. Very good! That is all that is necessary. You play my part, and my scheme goes on."

"Unless," Knox remarked, "there is a little more in your scheme than a mere attempt to create jealousy between a shrewd, far-seeing man like Melinoff and a clever, calculating young woman like Adele de Hagon. I am very much afraid you will find it inadequate."

"There is more in it," De Brinault said quietly. "The question is, are you with me in this?"

"I am," Knox replied steadfastly.

The roll of the gong reverberated through the house. De Brinault's valet knocked at the inner door.

"After dinner tonight," De Brinault whispered, "stroll out of the room with me. Every one leaves the table together, and there is music in the hall, where coffee and liqueurs are served. At dinner time you are to take in Miss de Hagon. Remember your role. She is clever."

"I will remember," Knox promised.

Knox, a few minutes afterward, by his hostess's instructions, carried Adele de Hagon away from Melinoff's side.

"For once in my life," he murmured, "I am glad that I am not an ambassador!"

"You would have found your hostess," she laughed, "a most entertaining woman."

"Knox lowered his voice a little. He was certainly acting his part very well. Now that he was seated by Miss de Hagon's side, he found his tongue readily enough. From the passing of the hors d'oeuvres to the coming of the ices, he made love respectfully but ardently in the light parlance of the day, and his companion accepted his homage with a laughing tolerance, accompanied now and then by a flash of the eyes or a softer word. From the other side of the table, Melinoff occasionally glowered at them. Adele de Hagon affected to disregard his ill humor."

"I wonder why," Knox remarked once, "that stout old gentleman opposite seems trying to transfix me."

"If he only heard," she continued mischievously, "half of what you have been saying to me!"

"I'll raise my voice, if you like."

She flashed a warning glance at him. "If you want to be friends with me," she advised, "please be careful."

"May I come and talk with you in the hall, please?" Knox begged.

She shook her head reluctantly. There was, nevertheless, a provocative gleam in her eyes. "Perhaps—a little later," she murmured, as she rose to her feet. "Don't come out with me now. I know that Prince Melinoff wants to speak to me."

Some folding doors were thrown open, and the company of guests strolled out into the great hall, where tables were set for coffee and a small company of musicians played softly in a balcony.

De Brinault came up, and a moment or two later he and Knox strolled toward the billiard room. On the way, Knox stopped short. Just behind the musicians a woman was leaning over, gazing intently down upon the little company.

"What is it?" De Brinault demanded.

Knox motioned with his head, but the woman, as though conscious of his observation, had flitted away. "Adele de Hagon—up there!" Knox exclaimed.

"I saw her distinctly behind the violinist. And only a second ago she was talking to old Melinoff! What the mischief is she doing up there?"

"I can't see any one at all except the musicians," De Brinault declared.

"I tell you that she vanished almost as if she were looking at her, and—good heavens—she's down there with Melinoff again! Is the place enchanted, or is there a secret staircase?"

De Brinault shrugged his shoulders. "The lady has bewitched you, dear friend. Come with me now. At dinner time, let me tell you, you were magnificent. I watched the old bear bristle all over. Our hostess—did you know that she was my cousin—is on our side. Everything is arranged. Now listen."

At 12 o'clock precisely Knox turned the handle of a sitting-room door upon the second floor, and, closing the door behind him quickly, stood for a moment upon the threshold, listening intently.

The room was lit only by the flames of the wood fire and by a single heavily-shaded reading lamp.

"Adele, is that you?" he whispered softly.

A slim feminine figure rose slowly from the sofa. The sequins glittered from her gold and white dress as she rose to her feet. She pushed back her fringe a little with one hand.

"But this is so rash of you!" she faltered. "I did not mean it. Indeed, I never meant you to come. You must have known that."

He crossed the room swiftly to where she was standing, fell on one knee and seized her hands. "But, Adele," he protested, "I can't help it. All this evening you have been torturing me—torturing me because you smiled and whispered with that Russian pig!"

The door leading into the bedroom

behind, which had been half open at his entrance, creaked a little. Neither of them seemed to notice it.

"Why are you jealous of him, you stupid person!" she murmured. "He is old enough to be my father!"

"And ugly enough for Caliban," Knox asserted. "And yet, you see how foolish I am! He speaks with an air of proprietorship. It maddens me!"

"Absurd!" she laughed. "Why, it is scarcely twenty-four hours since we met."

"But all my life worth living lies inside that twenty-four hours!" Knox insisted.

He rose to his feet. His arm was around her waist. He drew her closer to him.

"There is no one of whom you need be jealous," she assured him softly. "As for that old man, I will let you into a secret. There is a plot just now to catch him tripping. He has been so hard on others, a message for him from Aust—from a country I will not mention. You know nothing about politics, Algernon, but Melinoff thinks himself a heaven-sent diplomat. We are just teaching him that it is possible even for the cleverest to make a slip. In less than a fortnight's time, he will be in such disgrace with his country that the chances are he will be recalled. But did you come here," she added, dropping her voice, "to talk politics with me?"

His arms were around her, her head fell a little back. Suddenly the inner door was thrown open. They sprang apart. Prince Melinoff stood there, looking at them. His face was white with anger, his voice shook. After that first moment's stare of horror Adele covered her face with her hands.

"So I have to thank an honest serving woman for my escape, have I?" he exclaimed. "You—"

He broke into Russian, speaking rapidly and with fierce diction. Adele sank on to her knees. She held out one hand imploringly toward him. He turned her contemptuously. Finally he departed. They were left alone. She rose to her feet slowly and pointed to the door. "Go," she whispered.

Lady Hanover was almost bad tempered as she wished Knox and De Brinault good-bye on the following morning. "I really don't know whether to apologize to you or to scold you both," she declared with a glance at the footman who was standing at a discreet distance. "Twenty-four hours ago, my house party promised to be a complete success. Now everything seems to have gone wrong. Do you know that at 1 o'clock Prince Melinoff ordered his motor car and drove up to London, with scarcely a word of explanation. Miss de Hagon's maid has just come down to say that her mistress has a headache and will not be down until luncheon time. Something has happened."

De Brinault raised his cousin's hand to his lips. "Dear Emmie," he affirmed earnestly, "something indeed has happened which you do not understand, but nevertheless, for all our sakes, do not regret it. You have obeyed a few simple requests and given shelter for the night to a very talented young lady. Incidentally, you have preserved the peace of Europe."

De Brinault and Knox drove to the station, talking most of the way a little excitedly. On the platform they were joined by a young lady in a long gray traveling coat and a very smart French hat. Knox looked at her in amazement. "Upon my word," he exclaimed breathlessly, "no wonder that old beast was taken in! Good morning, mademoiselle!"

She greeted them with a charming smile. "Success, I trust?" she inquired.

De Brinault handed her into a carriage of the train which had just drawn up. "Mademoiselle," he replied, "we pray so. Till the evening newspapers are out, we cannot tell for certain. So far as your part was concerned, success was absolute."

"For the rest of my life," Knox sighed regretfully, "I shall not know whether I am really in love with Miss Adele de Hagon or Mlle. Dulche, of the Comedie Francaise, and temporarily of the Palace, London. Your fringe, your eyes, your figure, your tone—"

She shrugged her shoulders. "But, monsieur, I am famous throughout the world! I had but to study Miss de Hagon from the balcony behind the musicians for ten minutes and the thing was done."

"What I cannot quite understand," Knox remarked, "is where was Miss de Hagon from 12 till half past 2?"

"I'm pressed into a rubber of bridge by her hostess," De Brinault explained. "Her waiting-maid—our dear but very expensive friend Marie—whispered in her ear three minutes before that the time for Melinoff's little visit was to be 1 o'clock."

"But now?" Knox exclaimed. "And last night—afterward?"

De Brinault shook his head. "An affair of Marie and a sleeping powder," he remarked. "She will not wake, until midday and the luncheon is at the Mansion House at 1 o'clock."

De Brinault and Knox met early that evening by appointment at the latter's club. De Brinault entered, carrying an evening paper. Knox was already studying it. The face of the former was wreathed in smiles. "My friend," he exclaimed, "you have read? In Paris they will be jubilant; on the continent agast."

"Melinoff, in his speech this morning at the Mansion House—at the very luncheon where it was stated that he would not be present—reaffirmed, as it had never been affirmed before, the unchanging alliance between France and Russia and the Triple Entente. He spoke for his country and declared that no bribe or favor from any other nation could disturb it."

Knox rang the bell for a waiter. "Two cocktails," he ordered—"Martini-dry."